



British Photography and the Photobook at the time of Brexit

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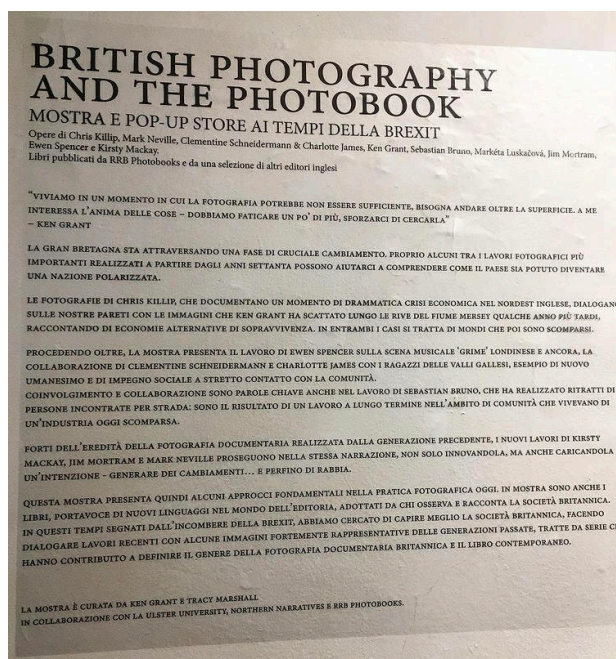
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British Photography and the Photobook at the Time of Brexit.





Photographs from the Opening of the exhibition *British Photography and the Photobook at the Time of Brexit*. Micamera Gallery, Milan, January 17th 2020.

Above Right: Public Introduction to exhibition by Ken Grant and Micamera Director Giulia Zorzi.



Portfolio Seminar with Ken Grant and publisher Rudi Thoemmes, RRB Publishing.

Explanatory Essay and Text for Micamera Website Blog January 2020.

Letter to *Giulia Zorzi* on Friday January 31 2020

For Micamera Blog, Milan, Italy.

There was a red sky dawn over Liverpool this morning before it softened to grey and one of those days that might just not get light. The end of January 2020, it's raining and the UK is pulling away from ties with Europe that have done so much to extend the reach of culture and partnership, not least in photography, the development of the Photobook and the ideas and solutions to storytelling that have started to transcend borders and the inward looking, half-thought ideas that those who now govern us seem intent on establishing.

When Chris Killip wrote, in the short foreword to his seminal *In Flagrante* that “the objective history of England doesn’t amount to much if you don’t believe in it, and I don’t...”, he seemed to set down, in a few short phrases, the anger and resistance he felt to some of the orthodoxies that contain us, that prescribe our lives and diminish our freedoms. A couple of years after it was published, on an earlier wet dawn, I was

walking down a quiet Irish lane with him ahead of some work we were doing later that day. We spoke about *In Flagante* but, more accurately, about some of the scenarios in the work that we both understood. We discussed the shipyards that were to close or shift to the erratic contracts of temporary working patterns. We remembered the punk bands he photographed in the Station, their names, their spirit and how they screamed at the condition of the country that they found themselves in just after the Miners Strike in 1985. I told him I had screamed too...and, here we are three decades on, on the morning Britain leaves Europe and some of us, though we're a lot older, are still screaming.

In Flagante seemed to consolidate a moment in Britain that saw the closure of industries and the fragmenting of working class communities. In Liverpool and the Northwest of England, the Thatcher government, as we now know from the recent release of historical government papers, was targeted with a programme of 'managed decline' (though Thatcher and her contemporaries underestimated the resistance she would face in the 'pool of life', as Jung called Liverpool). As one of the few northern cities to vote 'remain' in the 2016 referendum, Liverpool is, with little coincidence, the city that has shunned the right wing media, with many stores refusing to stock titles produced by the Murdoch news companies. This region does its own thing and for that I'm thankful. Just north of Liverpool, Craig Atkinson has been producing the Café Royal Books series in Southport since 2005. They are made as small 'zines. Each Thursday, Craig releases at least two new volumes that, in the spirit of Do-it-Yourself, he designs in collaboration with each photographer and then walks around the corner to the print shop where the local printer produces short runs of titles that have, with no exaggeration, become a new and rich history of lives in Britain since the 1970s. First sold at book fairs and distributed through bookshops, they have now reached museums and collections –the Martin Parr Foundation has collected all of them and continues to do so. In a small but perfectly formed way, each volume offers insights into the culture of Britain –along with the tendencies and preoccupations of those photographing Britain across this modern era. For edits of work that don't extend expand in number to fill traditional books, they are vignettes, often foregrounding particular details of working and social lives whilst reaching across the classes and geographies that vary so much in Britain.

The autonomy Craig Atkinson has established comes from a model that is low price and so close to the fanzine culture that spread across Britain through the new wave and punk 1970s – “here's three chords, now form a band...” –to the football culture that mixed music, art, politics and style into home-grown magazines that, instead of being subservient to metropolitan styles and instruction, influenced them.

The solutions of the photographers included in the *Micamera* exhibition are diverse, yet share the same spirit and grounding in a need to work deeply with communities and conditions, telling stories and conveying spirit and concerns, whilst rejecting the frameworks or financial models of established funding. For Clementine Schneidermann and Charlotte James, the wish to work with young teenagers in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, grew from Clementine's decision to live in a small town in one of the former mining regions. To be aware of how an area has been photographed before might present challenges for finding one's own voice. The collaboration the Clementine, a French woman who had settled in Wales as a student, made with fashion stylist Charlotte James, who was originally from the Welsh Valleys, is innovative and affirming. In colour, they collaborated with the girls on fashion shoots that drew on the cultural history of the region as much as it layered the terraced streets and homes into a dynamic that would eventually be distributed as a fashion magazine with a Welsh language title, '*It's called Ffasiwn*'. The reach of such materials goes beyond the usual scope of the photography book-buying public. It can be shared widely and it can work with a language that fuses fashion and documentary in an approach that is respectful, accessible and nourishing in spirit.

In the same region of Wales, Argentinian photographer Sebastian Bruno has been working as a photographer for a local community free newspaper. Suggesting to the editors that he should create that role, Bruno has used the economy of newsprint to make a series of newspapers that mix local news and conversations that dig so deeply into the detail of local life with his own articulate photographs of those who live in the area. Working with such formats allows greater financial freedom and the distribution of work into temporary exhibition spaces, not least the empty high street shops that have become unoccupied by the slow attrition of a decade of Government-imposed austerity measures. These are measures that have left the UK with a need to reappraise the very viability of town centres, shopping malls and the role of commerce in struggling communities.

For Jim Mortram, a photographer with responsibility as a carer for his mother in the East of England, the lack of answers and the continued abrasive nature of living with isolation, mental frailty and illness has led to a completely immersed articulation of what it means to be vulnerable in Britain now. His work draws on the traditions of engaged documentary and is made over time, in accordance with his own obligations as a carer and the moments he can shape to support and assist those he photographs and supports. The body of work, *Small Town Intertia*, is a growing and sobering response to conditions he is sensitized to and perplexed by. With opportunity to travel limited, he uses the dual forms of the book (published recently by Bluecoat Press after a crowd-funding campaign) along with conversational texts and observations on his web pages

and on social media platforms that account for the lives of those he is close to. The work is refined and insistent, made more convincing by the craft of photography that comes through rich monochrome printing and the kind of immersion that would share depth with Eugene Richards and the most dedicated chroniclers of lives seen as peripheral by those with more self-serving political agendas. As much as Mortram introduces new depth to those experiences, Kirsty Mackay takes her upbringing in Glasgow as the starting point for a layered and evolving account of those close to what has become known as 'The Glasgow Effect'. Shorter life expectancy and poor health issues are the impetus for a piece of work that employs long term engagement and close accounts to respond to the dismantled community blocks that now leave open space and prospects and which was once her childhood region. *The Fish That Never Swam* draws on video interviews, portraiture and environmental studies and will be in development as a book in the coming year.

Mackay's work is a recent addition to a long established tendency in Britain to work with colour and involved technical approaches to advance the language of contemporary documentary practices. Ewen Spencer, in his *Open Mic* series engages with the musicians and young people who have developed their own music scene in inner city London. The Grime rappers and their followers are photographed with colour, strong flash and the kind of energy that Ewen has refined over years of his dedication to music and club culture. His topics, from his *Young Love* series to the more recent 'zines he has made in the Italian south, coalesce around scenes integral to the identity and purpose of young people across their adolescence. *Open Mic*, a small book that has now been reprinted, was rich in every way, mindful of the need for a price point affordable by those in the pictures and so carefully made that it will stand as an important account of the talent and kinship of those living forging new cultural movements in London. This book is rich in soul, powerful in execution and reminds us that if we gather ourselves, if we come together, perhaps we really can do anything.

It would be simplistic to attribute colour as a single route through which recent photography has worked. Mortram's black and white seems a choice made and kept, whilst for Mark Neville, the British photographer recently shortlisted for the Deutsche Bourse prize, those distinctions may be overridden with a logic that brings both into play as he sees fit. Neville first came wide acclaim with his *Port Glasgow* book. It was at once a community project and an act of defiance. The book, made after a residency in Glasgow was produced and delivered only to the homes of those in the area he was working. It considered the working and social lives of a port region on the River Clyde and worked with flash to light interiors of the dance halls and shipyards with an ambition that took interior photography a step further on. Though not originally produced to be publicly available, the work was recently collected as *Fancy Pictures* by

Steidl and the work is now available for wider audiences to consider a series of highly refined and deeply committed projects with communities in Britain.

Last year, not long after I'd published *Benny Profane*, I had a message from the Corinne Noordenbos, the photographer and teacher who has done so much to develop our understanding around the photobook. She suggested the pictures felt like they were from another time but yet seemed timely to be circulating now. Corinne may be right. Three decades on from that conversation with Killip and about some of the things that had faltered in Britain, about resistance, about the tendency to figure out a way to make things happen in spite of present circumstances, there seem strange echoes from that era as a hard-line government progresses the leaving of Europe –as those promises of unity and an end to austerity made at their recent election time are already withering. Killip's photobook of the punk scene at The Station will be published in its full form later this year. It has already been an oversized tabloid newspaper, published with the London designers Pony, perhaps with a nod to the music papers and free thinking spirit of publishing that was so common at the time of the work's making. Perhaps that's a spirit we can still recognise. We have the means, we have the heart and, in a way that's helpful and productive, we can channel the anger. In all honesty, it's been there all along, it's never gone away. It's lunchtime, as I finish writing on the day Britain leaves all we have gained. The rain has stopped and now, more than ever... we need to form a band.